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Institute for Policy Research



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The State of School Governing in England 2014

About this research

School governors play a vital role in the UK education system. However, research by the University of Bath Department of Education shows that schools often struggle to recruit governors with the necessary backgrounds and skillsets. This difficulty in recruiting is particularly apparent for schools in disadvantaged areas, which are most in need of effective governance.

Initial research which began in 2008, and culminated in the report *Governing our Schools*, found that governors who brought with them experience from paid employment commonly made a significant contribution to school governing, and that the skills which made school governing bodies effective could be found in workplaces across the country. Since then, there have been a number of changes to education policy that affect school governing and raise its profile; revitalising the importance of research in this area

In early 2014, University of Bath researchers from the Department of Education, in conjunction with the National Governors Association (NGA), conducted a national survey of governors with a focus on governor recruitment, retention and effectiveness. The findings provide valuable insight into the contribution of school governing bodies and identify key areas in which improvements can benefit the UK education system as a whole.

Research findings in context

In 2008, researchers from the University of Bath produced a report on Governing our Schools. Commissioned by Nick Chambers (then Director of Education at Business in the Community), it presented findings from a survey of school governors across England about the roles and responsibilities of school governing bodies. The researchers concluded that although school governing is a crucial and valuable aspect of education in England, the role of the governor and the process of governing was overloaded, overcomplicated and overlooked. Nevertheless, it was moving in the right direction and improvements were being made.

In 2014, a second study was carried out following significant changes to education policy, including the introduction of academies and free schools, which increase the significance and impact of governing bodies. In addition, it has been noted that school and college governors now oversee a national annual expenditure of more than £46 billion – a significant proportion of the UK education budget.

In this context, it is important for policy makers to understand the role, function and effectiveness of the school governing system, to ensure that resources are being used effectively. The research evaluates school governing in England, identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as recommendations for improvement. The research concludes that school governing is functioning well and is improving. However, there are a number of difficulties surrounding skills and training, recruitment, prioritisation of core governing functions, and ongoing challenges for schools in disadvantaged areas. In particular, the research suggests that new and coherent strategies for recruiting school governors need to be implemented to ensure that governing bodies are equipped with the right skills, experience and stability, while ensuring a supply of potential new governors and fresh ideas.

School and college governing bodies require a range of skills and expertise in order to function effectively. Many of these skills, particularly relating to finance and management, can be found in the workplace and employers can play a vital role in enabling employees to volunteer as school governors. Equally, being a school governor can also provide individuals with reciprocal opportunities for personal and professional development.

Key findings

- School governing is functioning well overall and is improving.
- Governors make a substantial contribution to education in England, in terms of time, activities and financial resources, contributing in excess of £1 billion in unpaid services to the education budget annually.
- School governing, although improving, is becoming more challenging.
- Governors require a range of important qualities and skills.
- Being a governor can foster work-relevant skills and expertise, creating reciprocal benefits between schools and individual governors.
- The effectiveness of individual governing bodies is hampered by difficulties recruiting governors, necessitating coherent recruitment strategies.
- Governing bodies frequently prioritise short-term core functions (such as scrutinising current educational and financial activities) over long-term strategic issues (including defining the ethos, vision and future strategy of the school).



However, the research reveals that governing bodies find it difficult to recruit new governors, particularly in primary and special schools. Moreover, the schools most in need of good governors – those in disadvantaged areas and with lower pupil attainment – struggle most to recruit governors, resulting in a ‘vicious cycle’. In addition, governing bodies typically do not reflect the ethnic diversity of their area, indicating difficulties in recruiting voluntary governors from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Increased efforts to train governors may also be required. While training and development opportunities are often provided, uptake of these is typically low. The research indicates, for example, that many governing bodies would benefit from training in the appointment of head teachers and senior staff.

Finally, the research concludes that governing bodies frequently prioritise short-term core functions (such as scrutinising the school’s current educational and financial activities) over long-term strategic issues, including defining the ethos, vision and strategy for the future of the school. In other words, governing bodies often spend more time scrutinising a school’s performance, and less time finding solutions for strategic challenges.

Policy implications

By considering the implications of this research, policy makers can help to strengthen school governing bodies across the country and underpin the success of the educational system.

Effective and coherent governor recruitment strategies are required

The principal challenge facing governing in England is enlarging the pool of citizens willing to become governors, particularly those in professional and management occupations. The challenge of recruiting new governors with the requisite skillset needs to be met head on with an effective and coherent strategy. Meeting this challenge may involve:

- Recognising at a national level the contribution that governing bodies make to education.
- Raising the profile and importance of school governing to inspire a new generation of potential governors who want to contribute to society.

- Emphasising the opportunities for personal and professional development that governing bodies can provide, both to encourage young professionals to take on voluntary governor roles, as well as to encourage employers to make it easier for employees to volunteer.
- Broadening the diversity of ethnic backgrounds represented on governing bodies.
- Creating a balance between work-friendly and family-friendly governing operations to enable more people to volunteer as governors.

Governing bodies need to give long-term strategic goals greater priority

Given increasing levels of institutional autonomy and independence, particularly in the case of academy schools, governing bodies need to be encouraged to give greater priority to strategic issues rather than focusing solely on scrutinising educational and financial performance.

Governor training must focus on senior staff recruitment

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the skills and training required for governing bodies to be able to effectively recruit head teachers and senior staff. Individual governors also need to be encouraged to take up such training opportunities.

Collaboration between governing bodies can help struggling schools

Governing bodies from different institutions can work together to help struggling schools improve. Schools in disadvantaged areas, which are most often in need of effective governance, typically struggle to recruit governors with the requisite skills. To combat this, governing bodies in the same area or region can work together to improve school and college governance overall. For example, long-serving and capable governors of successful schools could be encouraged to volunteer as governors for schools that face greater challenges.

Methodology

Between March 10th and April 14th 2014, researchers at the University of Bath Department of Education and the National Governors' Association (NGA) undertook a national survey of school governors. The survey asked respondents for their views on recruitment and retention of governors; suitable governor qualities; induction, training and development; personal experiences; and governing body functions. The survey questionnaire was developed jointly by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the Education and Employers' Taskforce, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), National Co-ordinators of Governor Services, and School Governors' One-Stop Shop (SGOSS) Governors for Schools and Colleges. Overall, 7,713 responses were received and analysed.

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More on this research:

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